MAGAZINE SECTION

New York Tribune

MAGAZINE SECTION

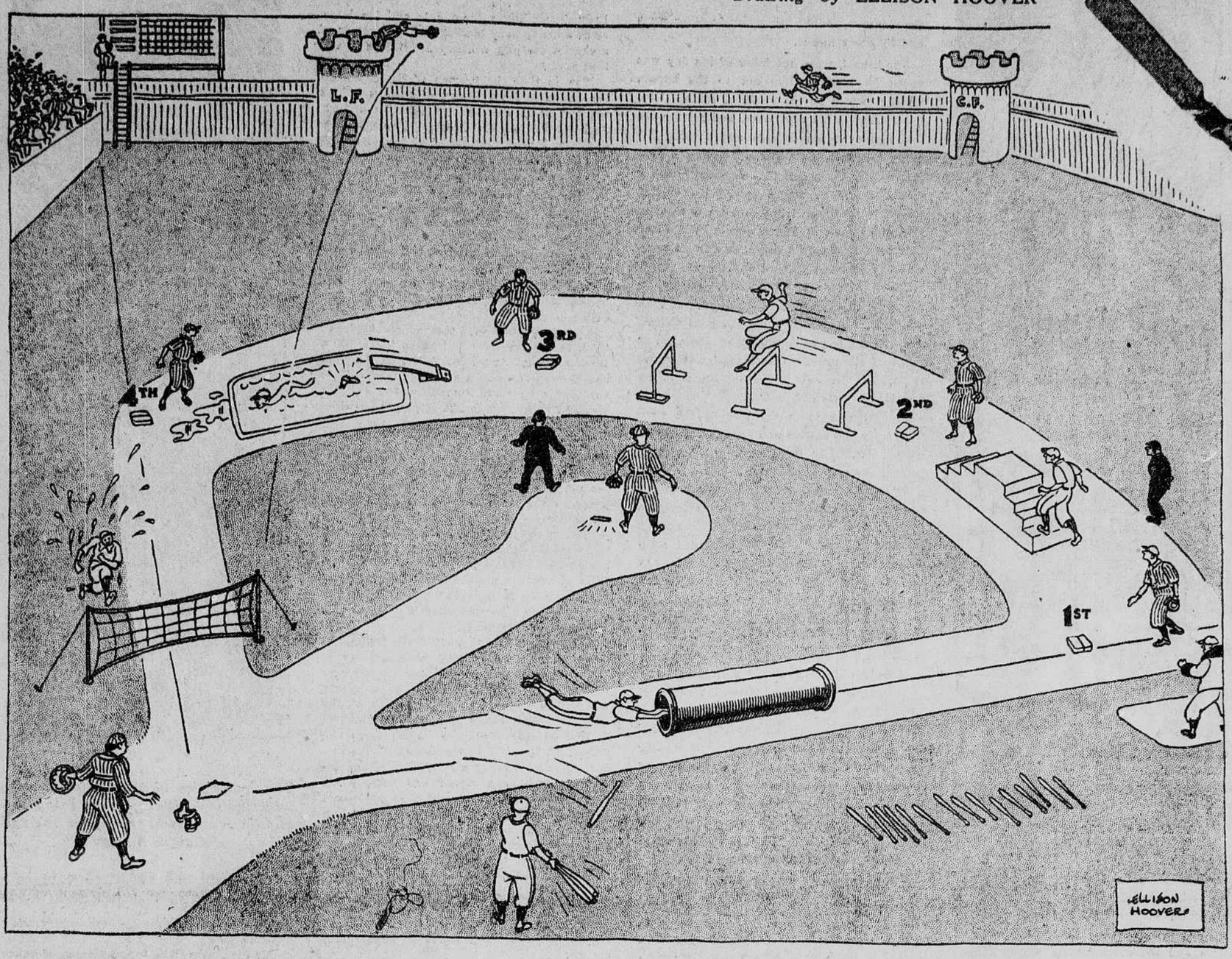
PART VI EIGHT PAGES — SUNDAY, AUGUST 20, 1922 — EIGHT PAGES PART VI

IS THE HOME RUN A MENACE TO BASEBALL?

By BOYDEN SPARKES

Drawing by ELLISON HOOVER

Willie Keeler, who managed to average .383 for eight years in the big leagues, and without once trying to knock the cover off the ball



If home runs are becoming too frequent and too easy, something like this might remedy matters: four bases instead of three, hazards (as in golf) along the base paths, outfielders posted on the battlements, formerly the fence

"Hitting 'em where they ain't" is quite as good cricket as it is good basebadll. Ther's no live core to the ball. It doesn't travel "on its own"

THE giraffe, scientists say, has got a very long, straight neck because of the cumulative result of generation after generation of stretching up to the branches of the acacia trees, but Babe Ruth's genius for hitting home runs is not so easily accounted for. His case is one of variation from type.

His ancestors deserve much of the credit, of course, for the poke-force this Yankee engine of hitting gets into his swing, but the men who are continually tampering with the rules of baseball have even more to do with his success than variations and modifications in his family tree.

If you ask Charles H. Ebbetts, part owner of the Brooklyn National League baseball team, he will tell you that the trees from which Babe Ruth gets his bats have a greater responsibility for the distance the Yankee star drives a baseball than an entire forest of geneological timber.

"All of these home runs are to be accounted for by heavier bats," said Mr. Ebbetts. He had been asked the question so many times for so many months that he has it all memorized. "I don't mean that the bat actually weighs more, but there is more of the body of the wood down where it meets the ball."

Baseball's Heavy Villain Seems To Be the Bat

"Rule 15 says the bat must be round and no longer than forty-two inches and no thicker than two and three-quarter inches. Well, that is one baseball rule that hasn't been monkeyed with. Years ago there were very few bats that were made as thick as the law allowed.

"Most of the players thought more about getting the full forty-two inches and didn't concern themselves so much about heft or thickness. Now they are mostly using bludgeons. They take smaller handles and have the bulk of the wood at the end of the bat where it encounters the ball. I'd say 85 per cent of the increased number of home runs is due to this.

"Possibly the boys learned from golf that they could employ all of their strength in a swing without having such a thick handle. The bats are much shorter. There's one player—I name no names, but he's a little bird—uses a very short bat. And he can hit.

"There has been no change in the ball except that better materials are used in its manufacture. The wool is better, winds tighter and makes a ball more nearly perfect. I believe these two things have resulted in giving the batter an advantage over the pitcher. In the old days the bat, as I recall it, was almost as thick at the handle as it was at the business end. It was like that when the best hitter in any league was 'Wee' Willie Keeler."

There was a name to conjure with until twelve years ago, when Billy Keeler's legs began to cheat him. Keeler was the first baseball batter of note to regard his work as an art, almost as a science. If there is a man alive who could settle this controversy about the home-run industry it would be "Wee" Willie Keeler, who is to Brooklyn small boys what Warren G. Harding is to the youngsters of Marion, Ohio, or David Belasco to the ushers of San Francisco theaters, or Gene Sarazen to caddies everywhere.

Never a slugger, "Wee" Willie banged out safeties when they counted and made a specialty of singles with the result that in 1897 and 1898 he led the National League in seasonal batting averages. It was .432 in 1897, and his average for eight years was .383, something over 200 hits a season for eight successive years.

When Billy Keeler was doing that the little frame house in 376 Pulaski Street was a baseball fan's shrine. It was the home of Willie Keeler and his dad.

Five feet six inches tall, a full-length bat was only two feet shorter than this man with an uncanny ability to, as he expressed it, "hit 'em where they ain't." Besides that he had a grand eye. In the seven years he was with the American League he finished second once and third once. It would be difficult to say with accuracy just how soon after he was born in that Pulaski Street house in March, 1872, that "Wee" Willie began to play ball. But it is an historical fact that when he was twenty years of age he was getting $2 a game with Plainfield, N. J. Then he went to Binghamton, of the Eastern League, for $90 a month. Next came the Giants with an offer of $1,000 a year. They tired of him quickly—his hitting powers were almost latent then—and in successive deals he went to Brooklyn and Baltimore. There is where he began to make good and for sixteen years was a star outfielder, always in right field.

The Little Man Whom Pitchers Dreaded

In 1893 the Baltimore Orioles already had John McGraw, Hughey Jennings and Kelley, and with Keeler's enlistment Ned Hanlon completed the most famous quartet known to baseball. In 1894, 1895 and 1896 the Orioles were champions of the National League. They were second in 1897 and 1898, but it wasn't "Wee" Willie's fault they did not lead then, for those were the two years he was at the top of his batting form. It was then the grandstands rocked with yells and stamping feet at the sight of a frail little figure stepping out to the plate, hefting a bat that he gripped almost in the middle and drying his palms of perspiration by rubbing them over the seat of his breeches. Those were the days when "Wee" Willie Keeler's picture was on the sporting pages day after day with captions that said: "Wizard batter who made the winning run," or "The most accurate bunter in the business."

In a thick envelope of crumbling yellow clippings, from old newspapers is "Wee" Willie's history, including a fragment of a story in 1903 that proclaimed that Keeler's salary was $10,000 a year. University athletic control boards sought his services as coach and at least one Harvard team won victories by a studious absorption of "Professor" Keeler's theories on batting practice.

Your old English cricketer comes back and finds his national game just what it was when he was a boy. No rule changes to bother him

So if there exists a mortal with a good perspective on the true merits of the rise in the home-run market it should be Billy Keeler. This old struggle between the pitchers and the batsmen has been his study throughout his fifty years. He should be able to remember the days when scores of 36 to 8 were not considered absurd. It is likely he even saw games played by whiskered stars where the pitchers worked underhand. But where is one to find a baseball star who was lost from the firmament a decade ago? It is not so difficult when the star is Keeler and information is sought in Brooklyn. A few months ago in an invalid's wheel chair he was trundled off the boat that ferries between Sheepshead Bay and Rockaway Point.

"You'll find him right down against the ocean, in the very last bungalow on Rockaway Point," said one of his old admirers, and there he was.

Billy Keeler has discarded the wheel chair and his friend and physician, Dr. Charles Wuest, watches with tender solicitude while the old ball player who used to go from home to first like a flash doles out a precious energy ration for a short walk on the beach. The air is building him up in fine style, and that is more important even than what the old boy thinks of Babe Ruth.

"He's got a beautiful swing," praised Keeler, sitting down on a hanging couch on his bungalow veranda. "Yes; he's got a beautiful swing. Ruth is better than any one. I don't mean that he is a scientific hitter (Billy shook his head here), but he certainly is a wonder with home runs.

"I don't know whether the ball is any more 'live' or not. I've only seen one game—the last championship—since they claim the ball has been changed, and I couldn't judge by that, but there are several factors that have altered the chances of the pitchers and the batters.

"That is a changing struggle. Every baseball player who studies the game is really an inventor seeking ways to alter it. It's like the centuries-old contest between the makers of armor and the makers of projectiles. Somebody produces a bullet-proof armor and then somebody else produces a bullet that can penetrate anything. It's the same way with bank burglars and bank vaults. As fast as the bankers improve their strong-boxes just so do the yeggs devise a new scheme for breaking the burglar-proof safes. If the burglars and the safes were kept at their original level of ability and material the contest would be better. Perhaps baseball is like that.

"Taking away the spit ball improved hitting. The spit ball was one I couldn't figure. I never did approve of it, either. It doesn't look right to see a fellow spitting on a ball. It's unhealthy, too, as far as that goes. Then they got to using all sorts of stuff on the ball, rubbing it with emery paper and putting paraffin on it. A lot of pitchers lost control fooling around with these freak deliveries and then, when the rules were altered, forbidding such practices, the spit ball boys didn't have a thing. That alone was sufficient to give the batters a better chance.

"There is another thing about the improvement in hitting. More are playing, and the big leagues have more material from which to recruit their teams. Of course, proportionately, as many good pitchers will be produced as batters. Changing the rules changes the balance. But it's a better game now. Don't forget that."

Switching the subject abruptly, Billy pointed out over the low sea wall a few yards from his bungalow, where the tips of slender masts rose strangely from the surface of the ocean.

"That's where the Princess Anne went down," he said. "She was bound for Norfolk and got blown in here."

Sometimes the surf that pounds on the shore of Rockaway Point is a caution to mariners, but when it rolls in at night now and breaks with a roar on the beach close by the bungalow the old ball player can dream that he is hearing again the wild yells of his admirers in the grandstands pleading for a needed hit from the bat of Wee Willie Keeler.

Rules of Other National Games Stay Put

Other countries do not change the rules of their national sports as Americans do. A bull fighter of to-day could use the swords of a matador of a century ago. The black owner of Lily, the goat mascot, could roll a natural with the dice of D'Artagnan. Craps, however, is an American game that refutes the argument that we are always fiddling with the rules. A seven is understood in a deaf-mute asylum. It never requires the services of an umpire. The quality of the players sometimes creates new conditions, but the handicap in a fair game remains the same with regard to the shooter and his opponents. Occasionally one will hear a plaintive cry of "Boy, don't pick up that money 'til the bones is quiet." That is the way it is with cricket.

The present-day laws of cricket as adopted by the Marylebone Cricket Club, of London, would not confuse Tom Brown if he should come out once more to play for Rugby, and the men who won Waterloo on the cricket fields of England could, if resurrected in the vigor of youth, make a creditable showing against Oxford to-day.

"What? Revise the rules of cricket!" repeated Harry Rushton in horrified tones. "Why, my dear sir, it wouldn't be cricket."

Mr. Rushton is secretary of the Metropolitan District Cricket League, and the very best bowler of the Brooklyn team. He allowed his bath to get cold last Sunday morning before starting for the cricket field in order to make this point clear.

For thirty years, Mr. Rushton, British born, but now an American citizen, has always been among the first four bowlers among New York cricketers. He has played steadily in the Metropolitan League since it was organized in 1890.

"The revision of rules in cricket is usually for clarification. The only change that I can recall which altered the balance of chance between the batsman and the bowler was really due to the American influence, I should say, and England, of course, has never accepted this change.

"About four years ago, there was agitated a movement among American cricketers to increase an 'over' from six to ten balls, so that so much time would not be lost in changing fielders. In Australia the 'over' has been changed from six to eight, but the Briton at home clings to the six ball 'over.' This change in the number of balls to an 'over' makes the bowler's task a trifle harder. In my memory this is the only time the struggle between batsman and bowler was altered by changing the rules.

To Change Cricket Rules Wouldn't "Be Cricket"

"When you speak to a Britisher about changing rules of any kind you touch him deeply. A ball must weigh not less than five and a half ounces, and not more than five and three-quarters ounces. The balls we use in America are all imported and cost us $4.50. The slightest variation in the materials or method of manufacture would have a decided influence on the game. I'll wager the Duke of Wellington could have played with this ball."

Mr. Rushton produced a ball in size similar to a baseball. It was of red leather, quite like that which is so popular at Christmas time in gentlemen's slippers to go with the velvet collared befrogged smoking jackets. Instead of the stitches following twisting curved lines, as on a baseball, it was in six rows, that formed an equator on this sphere. The halves had been formed by quarters sewn together and the seams turned in.

"There is packed leather in there," explained Mr. Rushton, "and there isn't any live core."

He produced a copy of the constitution and by-laws of the Metropolitan District Cricket League, of New York, which included the laws of cricket as adopted and amended by the Marylebone Cricket Club, of London. Marylebone is the capital of the cricket world. Revisions in the laws were made by this organization in 1884, 1889, 1899, 1900, 1902 and 1906. Baseball club owners have been changing the rules at least once a year and oftener, when they think of something they consider urgent.

In all the revisions of cricket laws, however, there is nothing to compare with the baseball ruling that altered the distance between batsman and pitcher a few years ago, nor yet the rule that made foul tips "strikes."

"In thirty years we've had nothing to compare in cricket with the radical change-making 'fouls' into 'strikes,'" said Mr. Rushton. "In cricket you can't take a bowler out in the middle of an 'over.' The bowler must finish unless he drops dead. In fact, there are no substitutes in cricket, except if a fielder is hurt a man can replace him, but only in fielding, for his side thereafter must bat one man short."

Clearly, if baseball is to remain baseball, the men who control it will have to stop tampering with it. At the rate they are going, it is not too much to anticipate that before long, in order to cut down the number of home runs, they may be ordering an increased number of bases, or forcing all players to don at least one Oregon boot after getting to first.